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C O N F I D E N T I A L DHAKA 002610

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BG](#) [KDEN](#)

SUBJECT: PMO HARDBALL AGAINST ERSHAD UNLEASHES BIZARRE SOAP OPERA

REF: 04 DHAKA 1572

Classified By: P/E Counselor D.C. McCullough, Reason(s): 1.4 (b),(d)

1. (C) Summary: In a riveting turn of events starting June 2, former President Ershad stripped his number-two wife Bidisha of all Jatiya Party positions, police then arrested her on theft and embezzlement charges, Bidisha threatened to kill her son and herself, Ershad divorced Bidisha as a bigamist, and Ershad fled to Saudi Arabia. The catalyst of this bizarre soap opera appears to be PMO concern that Bidisha was pushing the Jatiya Party -- still a force in northern Bangladesh -- to ally with the opposition Awami League. End Summary.

2. (C) On June 5, Jatiya Party Presidium member Kazi Zafar Ahmed told poloff that the Ershad/Bidisha soap opera began several weeks ago when the BDG threatened to arrest Bidisha, the 30-something junior wife of the eighty-something former president, on charges to include kidnapping, bigamy, money laundering, and espionage (apparently on behalf of India). Ershad reportedly urged Bidisha to leave the country for her own protection, but she refused, electing instead to assault Ershad and trash his personal effects. Ershad then decided, in self-defense, to have his wife arrested and told police, and the newspapers, that she had embezzled funds and stolen a cell phone from him. On June 2, Ershad stripped Bidisha of all party positions, including her seat on the Presidium. On June 4, police arrested Bidisha at the Ershads' home in the diplomatic enclave after a brief public standoff when she threatened to kill her child and herself.

3. (C) Other sources, widely reported in the media, describe a somewhat different scene. Bidisha, they say, was pushing Ershad to remove ABM Ruhul Amin Howlander as Secretary General of the Jatiya Party in favor of Kazi Feroj Rashid, who recently returned to the Jatiya Party fold from the Bangladesh Jatiya Party (BJP) faction, a member of the ruling four-party coalition. Haris Chowdhury, PM Zia's Political Secretary and referred to by media accounts as an un-elected

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BNP leader in the PMO, then threatened to activate pending corruption charges against Ershad if the change took place.

4. (C) Haris was also supposedly antagonized by Bidisha's support for a Jatiya Party alliance with the opposition Awami League and her alleged contacts with Indian Government officials who encouraged her to do the same. The politically ambitious Bidisha had persuaded her husband several years ago to remove his estranged senior wife, the sixty-something Raushan, from the party Presidium; Raushan, MP and leader of the party in Parliament, favors closer ties to the BNP.

5. (C) The latest twist came June 6, when Ershad announced he had divorced Bidisha because she remained married to and involved with the man she had claimed to have divorced before marrying Ershad. "One woman cannot have two husbands but she had," Ershad told the media before leaving for Saudi Arabia. "She has cheated me." Jatiya SYG A.B.M. Ruhul Amin Howlander told poloff that Ershad will remain in Saudi Arabia until June 14, and that the trip was previously arranged.

6. (C) Comment: Belying the farcical nature of this bizarre affair is a serious political point: the PMO plays hardball against its opponents. With 14 seats mostly in northern Bangladesh, the Jatiya Party is still a potential player in certain electoral scenarios that involve a broad anti-BNP coalition. However, it is a party in apparently terminal popular decline, with an aged leader hamstrung by 14 corruption charges pending against him from his time as president that are held in suspense as leverage by the BNP and previously the Awami League when it was in power. In March 2004, Ershad complained to us that Haris Chowdhury was threatening to jail him over a parliamentary vote. The ex-president's bottom line was, "I can't go back to jail." Fifteen months later, nothing seems to have changed.

THOMAS